



Chapter 5: Legacies of learning: Negotiating guidelines for online discussion

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Abstract

This study involves students in constructing a community resource or legacy for future learners to use. In this instance, the resource takes the form of a set of guidelines for Asynchronous Online Discussion (AOD). Working within Moodle, teacher education students negotiated and revised sets of AOD guidelines for use in their own class, and to provide as a legacy for a future class. Data were generated over two semesters by consecutive cohorts of students. The findings highlight some key expectations that students set for peers when learning through AOD, such as a preference for accurate and responsive postings. It is also apparent that students appreciate and value the opportunity to negotiate guidelines. In terms of digital smarts, this study promotes effective use of AOD as an accessible means of engaging students in dialogue and deep learning. It is smart to negotiate guidelines for AOD with students so that expectations are clear, student perspectives are respected and opportunities to contribute to others' learning are provided.

Keywords: Asynchronous Online Discussion, student expectations, student perspectives, initial teacher education, zone of proximal development

Introduction: Three key concepts

This chapter explores the development of legacies of learning in the form of guidelines for online discussion, developed through a smart process of negotiation with teacher education students. The underpinning concepts are Asynchronous Online Discussion (AOD), legacies of learning and the notion of digital smarts.

A mainstay of online learning, AOD is used not only in teacher education distance programmes but also in online courses in a range of disciplines, across a range of contexts. AOD is also referred to as Computer Mediated Conferencing (CMC; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), web-based conferencing (Angeli, Valanides, & Bonk, 2003), Electronic Discussion (ED; Ferdig & Roehler, 2003), and Threaded Discussion/Conversation (Welser, Gleave, Fisher, & Smith, 2007). These discussions occur in an Internet-enabled environment without the need for discussion participants to be present in the same physical location or at the same time. In my study described here, participants are students and teachers engaged in discussions for learning purposes. Accordingly, each discussion is a formally constituted, topic-centred conversation established in the



context of Moodle, which is a specific learning environment using a web-based message board (Locke & Daly, 2007).

There is nothing new about AOD but it persists as a core means of instruction within an online class, functioning as a tutorial opportunity, a support network and ideally a community of learners where teachers and students build knowledge and understandings. Alongside AOD, key concepts pertinent to this chapter are the notion of legacies of learning, and the continuation of the digital smarts theme. Looking firstly at legacies, the concept stems from the moment when a learner asks questions like “How can I articulate my learning and understanding in a way that could be useful to others?” or “What can I contribute to inform the learning of those who come after me?”

Legacies are a way of sharing learning from experience and summing up advice to guide one’s peers. For example, having unravelled some of the complexities of AOD to arrive at a set of guidelines, it is helpful to provide these protocols as a starting point for others who may be new to learning through AOD.

My interpretation of the digital smarts theme coalesces around the notion of learning from the past in order to inform future practice while constantly evolving new understandings. Smart ideas are often simple and proven effective in a given context, and lessons can be drawn from these to focus future directions. Smart ideas are adaptive. Having taught for 20 years now, with 13 years of online teaching experience, I have learned that it is important to be agile in order to be fresh for each class. This does not mean reinventing the wheel every year, but rather drawing upon past experience to inform current practice while being responsive to each new group of students. My goal is to carry out joint inquiry with students, enlisting student input and acknowledging the value and power of student voice. Pooling our expertise, we negotiate and generate understandings around how best to approach our online work together. Negotiation is followed by trialling our ideas and then reflecting and regenerating new ideas. In the instance related here, we applied our digital smarts to negotiating guidelines for AOD as legacies for learning.

Why is AOD a smart choice?

The smart use of AOD is underscored by the advantages and possibilities for action or ‘affordances’ of an asynchronous and text-based approach to discussion. Collison, Elbaum, Haavind and Tinker (2000) sum up the advantages of AOD well:

Text-based asynchronous electronic communication is well suited for goal-oriented dialogue and learning environments. No one is left out of a fast-moving conversation or is silenced because he or she is not called upon in the classroom. The reverse is also true, in that the excuse of running out of time as the bell rings is no longer available to participants who are hoping to pass by simply attending class regularly. The act of committing thought to print impresses upon the participant a need for both reflection and clarity. And absence from dialogue, or shallow interaction, shows up quite clearly in threaded text formats. (p. 9)

As the above quote suggests, four key AOD advantages include that

- no one is left out or silenced—*inclusivity*



- class time is extended—*flexibility*
- the writing process is valued—*textual communication*
- reflection and depth are promoted—*deep learning*.

AOD is digitally smart because it is relatively low-tech and accessible to learners yet gives rise to significant affordances for learning. The realisation of these affordances depends in turn on smart guidelines for AOD.

Why negotiate guidelines with students?

We cannot assume that students intuitively know how to contribute to AOD. Students may not enter tertiary programmes with the communicative competence needed for engaging in academic online discussion, as distinct from chatting on FaceBook. It is smart to provide guidance in the form of direct and explicit instruction about how to participate effectively in learning-oriented discussion.

While teachers/lecturers might devise guidelines for students, there is value in a more democratic approach. Involving students in co-constructing guidelines for AOD communicates interest in, and respect for, students' contributions. This is a smart step toward sharing power with students and enabling them to give voice to decision-making about learning processes. As such, negotiating guidelines for AOD is a purposeful task, particularly as the guidelines are for current *and* future classes. The notion of making a contribution to others' learning is particularly relevant for teacher education students since students who create a resource for future learners are in effect moving towards their teaching position, connecting learning to teaching.

It is important for students to co-construct guidelines so that they convey their expectations directly to their peers as partners in online discussion. Students may be talking past each other if they assume common understandings that are not in fact commonly understood (Metge & Kinloch, 1984). Negotiating guidelines provides an opportunity to generate common understandings as foundations for learning together as colleagues.

It is smart to negotiate discussion guidelines with students for the benefit of their learning and the learning of students in the future.

Participation, transparency and guidance in the co-construction of AOD

Smart research related to AOD (e.g., Preece, 2000; Salmon, 2003, 2011) inspires exploration of human/social dimensions of AOD, valuing the perspectives of students as participants in AOD and seeking a basis for evolving guidelines to inform pedagogy.

Weimer (2002) asserts the need to involve learners actively in decision-making about their learning, values student input and recognises their ultimate responsibility for their learning. Bender (2003) also advocates that students be “involved participants in their learning process ... lead[ing] to a shared teaching and learning experience” (p. 191). There is a great deal of other support for this view of students' participatory voice, on democratic, ethical, pedagogical and pragmatic grounds (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Sharpe, Beetham, & de Freitas, 2010).



In terms of pre-service teacher preparation, Loughran (2006) argues that student teachers need to not only learn what is taught but also integrate and learn about the way it is being taught. As Loughran (2006) explains, there is a need to make the tacit knowledge of teaching explicit, since

if students of teaching are to genuinely "see into teaching", then they require access to the thoughts and actions that shape such practice; they need to be able to see and hear the pedagogical reasoning that underpins the teaching that they are experiencing. (p. 5)

In order to make the tacit explicit, teacher educators need to work smarter to ensure the basis of decision-making is shared with student teachers to enable them to understand underpinning pedagogical reasoning. One way to make such reasoning explicit is to closely involve students with decisions about learning protocols. It is therefore smart to negotiate and co-construct guidelines for practice so they begin to understand pedagogical reasoning underpinning the online discussions. It is the process of negotiating guidelines that supports making pedagogical reasoning explicit.

In this vein, Preece's (2000) notion of a framework for socially evolving, participatory development of guidelines is congruent with constructivist theorising of educational endeavours. That is, smart guidelines need not be rigid or static. They can develop and grow over time as participants co-construct ways of working. Smart guidelines provide a starting point and can operate as "liberating constraints", balancing flexibility with clear frameworks as part of responsive course design (McGrath, Mackey, & Davis, 2008, p. 615).

Like Preece (2000), others argue for AOD guides in the form of clear expectations, rules and training (Bonk & Dennen, 2003; Bonk & King, 1998). However, Bonk (2004) refers to 'roles and guidelines' for staff on one hand, but to 'expectations and rules' for students on the other. Bonk (2004) considers it vital "that the instructor provide expectations for online students" (p. 99), as well as "provide rules for interaction" (p. 100). This positions students as having to be compliant rather than having agency. In initial teacher education, this is counter-productive to making pedagogical reasoning explicit. A smarter approach is to ascertain students' expectations rather than imposing them, and to "modify expectations collaboratively with students", as Fauske and Wade (2003, p. 148) suggest. Smarter still is to share students' expectations with a subsequent cohort as a community resource and digital legacy.

This approach is inspired by and builds upon Brookfield and Preskill's (2005) use of letters from previous students. Each cohort of students can be invited to produce "letters from online successors", where students write 'exit' letters at the end of their online class, making suggestions for how the next cohort of students might best contribute online (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 244). In this way, the students leave a legacy or set of footprints as "a pathway for others taking future courses to find" (Salmon, 2002, p. 43). In addition, this work with students is compatible with Scardamalia and Bereiter's (2003) concept of knowledge building, and in keeping with the work of Collis and Moonen (2007) in relation to "the contributing student" (p. 19; also November, 2012), whereby students generate learning materials that are then used and updated by students in subsequent cycles of the course. Similarly, James' (2009) "online generational" approach (p. 94) involves classes sharing their work online each semester, and accessing the work of previous generations while writing for future generations. The goal is to enable students "to drive aspects of their educational experience, shape their involvement within it, and seek higher purpose by making educational contributions that



benefit others” (November, 2012, p. 14). Through these processes, knowledge creation and innovation become pervasive. Holmes and Gardner (2006) characterise the approach as “communal constructivism”, whereby “the learners involved deliberately contribute their own learning to a community resource base for the benefit of their peers and future learners” (p. 11). The attention to students’ voices, perspectives and experiences is in keeping with a phenomenographic approach, supportive of a distributed leadership model, where students learn to lead by leading learning. This is appealing in a teacher education context in particular, since the opportunity to influence the learning of others is compatible with the space the students seek to move to as teachers in their own right (Ellsworth, 1997).

AOD as situated practice

Increasingly, the interactive and interpersonal elements of learning online are emphasised over and above the delivery of content. For example, Ally (2008) defines online learning both in terms of learners interacting with content and with other learners, and a means of obtaining support as students construct meaning and engage in deep learning. The roots of this definition lie with social constructivist perspectives of learning, whereby learners interact to make meaning within specific situations and contexts. This view of online learning is compatible with the negotiation of discussion guidelines as a situated practice.

A social constructivist perspective essentially recognises the salience of human agency, highlighting students’ active participation in AOD. As Beetham (2007) reminds us, learners are “actors, not factors, in the learning situation” (p. 32). Hence the need for students to be closely involved in key decisions about learning processes and protocols for participation in AOD.

The notion that all learners are active participants is central to social constructivism, which is the view of learning underpinning AOD in much of the literature. This emphasises interaction, communication, collaboration and community (Hammond, 2005). According to this perspective, the knowledge constructed by learners is socially, not just individually, constructed (Vygotsky, 1978), and the role of language and communication during learning is highlighted. A key tenet of Vygotskian social constructivism is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This concept can be linked with Bruner’s (1990) concept of scaffolding, and Rogoff’s (1990) apprenticeship or guided participation. Together, these provide a helpful way of looking at interaction within AOD.

Vygotsky (1978) defined ZPD as the distance between the level of independent problem-solving and the level of potential development when the learner is guided by a teacher or peers. There is evidence of ZPD in action within AOD when students work collaboratively to promote their learning; for example, during an online discussion when a problem is set in the form of a discussion topic. In such a scenario, students work through the problem, collaborating to identify sub-problems and suggesting solutions. Throughout such a discussion, cognitive processes become more explicit as students brainstorm ideas and strategies, building on each other’s ideas. During this process teachers intervene to provoke thinking and meaning making. As a result of scaffolding within this context, the problems that students can cope with independently compared with that which can be accomplished with guidance or collaboration represent the zone of proximal development in action. As students increase their knowledge and skills through this social interaction, scaffolding and problem-solving, their ZPD alters.



Through careful structuring of discussion problems, teachers apprentice students through the use of authentic learning experiences and timely exposure to specific cultural practices (Bonk & King, 1998). In an online discussion, such cultural practices include the genre of language used, netiquette practices and visual tools like emoticons. Students' development and learning thus occurs through well-designed, guided participation in the social activity of the discussion (Rogoff, 1990). Together, students support and stretch each others' understanding of, and skill in using, these tools of culture. As Rogoff (1990) points out, the social interactions students engage in provide guidance, support, direction, challenge and impetus for development while being carefully facilitated.

Study context

Conducted in an initial teacher education context across two semesters in one year, this study examined the negotiation of discussion guidelines by two consecutive classes. Both classes were online electives (optional papers) within the Bachelor of Teaching degree programme, catering mainly for students studying to become primary teachers. The Semester A class had 40 students enrolled, with 28 students in the Semester B class.

The initial discussion guidelines were distilled from my doctoral studies (Forbes, 2012), [eBook format: [hyperlink to initial discussion guidelines](#) and to my thesis in Waikato Research Commons], which involved an ethno-phenomenographic study of participants' experiences and perspectives with AOD. Based upon focus groups and interviews with students and staff participants, I constructed the guidelines. These were subject to member-checking during the data generation phase of the thesis, and were shared with the wider university community. A key understanding and caveat, however, is that no single set of guidelines is definitive and suitable to every group and context. The intention is that each class have input into tailoring discussion guidelines to their learning needs. With this in mind, I introduced the initial discussion guidelines to a Semester A class and negotiated amendments with students during the course of the semester in order to derive a revised set of guidelines as a community resource. The revised guidelines became the class legacy and in turn were presented to the subsequent class (Semester B) as initial discussion guidelines, so that there was further evidence of the value to students. The Semester B class provided a check on the emerging findings from the Semester A students' discussions and feedback. This in turn enabled the operation of the ZPD to be evaluated.

Objectives

Having derived a set of initial guidelines for AOD in initial teacher education, the intention was to involve students in testing and renegotiating new guidelines to pass on as a legacy to fellow learners. The objectives of this study were to:

- Work with students in each of my classes to establish shared understandings and explicit expectations, formulating the guidelines for discussion in association with the students.
- Ensure that guidelines stipulate netiquette and lay a foundation for respectful and responsive communication.
- Ensure that guidelines take into account suggestions from students in previous cohorts.



- Strive to make the tacit explicit so that the work of teaching and discussion is demystified as far as possible, and students are involved in decision-making.

Methodology and research design

The research sits within a qualitative interpretive paradigm, aligned with a constructivist ontological and epistemological standpoint, where realities are local, specific, social and experiential and where knowledge is situated (Punch, 2009).

As mentioned, my doctoral research (Forbes, 2012) involved a series of focus groups and semi-structured interviews with students and staff, leading to an initial set of AOD guidelines based upon participant perspectives. In the current study, these initial guidelines (refer to Appendix 2) were proposed as a starting point for students in a Semester A online class to consider, trial, critique and revise. Students were asked: How helpful are these? What should we change? They were prompted to think about the purpose, expectations, assessment and suggestions relating to AOD. A discussion forum was established in Moodle for the purpose of inviting student comment and suggestions for change. Unlike the regular coursework discussions, the forum for negotiating discussion guidelines allowed students to post without their username appearing in the discussion, affording a degree of anonymity. Students were invited to propose changes, to argue, present counter-arguments, reformulate proposals, and to either reach a consensus via discussion or to vote on proposed changes to the AOD guidelines. Based upon this process, a second version of the AOD guidelines was produced, followed by the opportunity for a further revision towards the end of the semester. The latter effectively became the class legacy and was then proposed to the next class (Semester B) as a set of initial AOD guidelines, whereupon the process was repeated.

Each class was also asked to evaluate their participation in the process of negotiating discussion guidelines via an anonymous feedback tool in Moodle: How helpful were the initial discussion guidelines? Which changes did you suggest? How useful or otherwise was this process? How might the negotiation of guidelines be improved? Similar questions were also asked in the anonymous paper appraisals at the end of semester. The study received ethical approval at university level and students participated on a voluntary basis.

Findings: Student suggestions

Semester A: Accuracy and responsiveness

Student suggestions in Semester A highlighted two themes related to 1. Accuracy and length of postings in discussion, and 2. Responsiveness to discussion and to other participants. Each of these themes is illustrated and discussed below.

1. Accuracy and posting length

Semester A students highlighted a preference for correct punctuation, grammar and spelling in discussion posts. For example, the first student commented:



I would like to propose that a guideline be added asking that capital letters and correct grammar be used in all posts.

Subsequently, other students entered the negotiation forum to express agreement with the initial proposal, adding rationale and making links to the professional/classroom context. For example:

I agree we need to get in the habit of using correct spelling and grammar, we are soon going to be teachers ourselves, we need to set an example and not be lazy.

It really all boils down to the same thing—if you were in the classroom you would not use slang to answer a question. So I propose that appropriate language and correct grammar be used. So: Language and grammar appropriate to the classroom setting?

In addition to these fresh suggestions about the accuracy of postings, students also affirmed the existing guideline related to the length of posts, and reinforced the need for peers to adhere to the 150 word maximum limit for contributions.

I would like to see discussion lengths kept to the 150 word target

It is an interesting pattern that the Semester A class insisted on accuracy in postings, asserting the need for peers to check spelling, grammar and other written features. In doing so, the class set out to clarify expectations pertaining to the language of AOD. The hybrid character of this language has created much confusion and debate as literature characterises the language of AOD as neither spoken nor written but somewhere in between, like “say-writing” (Wegerif, 1998, p. 40) or “written talk” (Locke & Daly, 2007, p. 122). To be sure, this is a frequently mentioned point with respect to the language of AOD (e.g., Collis & Moonen, 2007; Locke & Daly, 2007). AOD has some of the informality of speech even though it is objectively typewritten text. Nevertheless, in most cases, the language of AOD is less formal than an essay or professional written communication (Collis & Moonen, 2007), and is characterised by Wegerif (1998) as “a casual and spoken style using the written medium” (p. 40). That the linguistic style of AOD is neither oral nor written, while reflecting aspects of both, has led some commentators to suggest that the language of AOD constitutes a new genre with its own unique form and function or purpose: a cybergenre (Bregman & Haythornthwaite, 2003). This is not to imply that all cybergenres are uniform, since the language of synchronous chat (“netspeak”, Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004) or that of social networking (“netlingo”, Thurlow et al., 2004) also differs markedly from AOD in an academic and professional context. This is the point made by the students in the Semester A class, as they reinforced the need for accurate written language, congruent with their emerging identities as teachers.

What is important here is that the expectations are clear and that participants understand how to communicate using the (negotiated) language of AOD, in order to make best use of the discussion for learning and teaching. A *relational* view of AOD looks to the ways human participants can act to enrich their online communication (Kehrwald, 2008). Participants have to figure out the language in order to express themselves and work effectively with others, a process that Pegrum (2009) refers to as “participatory literacy” (p. 38), knowing how to contribute. In this context, part of the effect is to enculturate student teachers into the teaching profession, since peer pressure in relation to language



reinforces the expectation that teachers are able to write and spell accurately, and this is part of the professional identity teacher education students aspire to (Ellsworth, 1997).

In addition, the students in this study (Semester A) reinforced the guidelines relating to brevity, allowing space for other voices. A succinct response is less dominant in the conversational space of the forum, allowing room for others' interpretations of the topic and inviting others' responses in turn. The literature occasionally makes mention of brevity as part of netiquette (e.g., Lehman & Conciecao, 2010), and Wegerif (1998) provides useful insight into the reluctance of participants to follow lengthy messages, since a long and carefully prepared posting invites a similarly crafted and considered response, which can discourage respondents due to time constraints.

2. Responsiveness – to topic and flow, to others by name

Students commented on the need to respond to other postings and participants in each discussion. For example:

I would like the guidelines to include a reminder at the beginning of each discussion for all participants to read the post above or the one above that and comment on it so as not to feel ignored. Sometimes in discussions you feel totally invisible!!!

The need to acknowledge others was therefore a key theme, along with the need to relate postings carefully to the discussion topic:

Extending the response to be more specific to the thread and topic could maybe work as some people just come on and chuck something in as it is compulsory instead of acknowledging the people above them as you would in a classroom setting. Perhaps reminding them of the 'virtual classroom' would make it better understood.

As the comment above suggests, students again expressed mindfulness of discussion behaviours appropriate to a classroom context, just as they did with the theme of accuracy.

... tricky to resolve but I think it [the guideline] should stop people just coming in and answering your first question even when we may have moved on, if you're too slow and it's moved on I think unless you have a real issue you need to move on too, if this was a classroom debate and you weren't there, you missed it!

The students therefore emphasised the need to ensure contributions were relevant to the discussion topic and flow, and responsive to peers, avoiding ignoring or repeating prior comments. A response provides feedback to the student who uttered the original comment. In this way, responsiveness is key to formative interaction in AOD. In AOD, participants receive feedback when another person responds to their contribution within the discussion, and particularly when the response serves to affirm, challenge or build on the earlier posting.

Responsiveness as a characteristic occurred when students explicitly acknowledged, connected and built on previous utterances rather than ignoring or repeating them. This is in keeping



with the recognition within the literature that posting messages does not equate with discussion, and that a direct reference to previous comments is needed to sustain community (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Dennen & Wieland, 2007; Kehrwald, 2008). Indeed, in Markel's (2001) view, the online response is social currency, or in Yates' (1996) terms, the online equivalent to "gaining the floor" (p. 208). Without a response, participants can feel excluded, inadequate and as if they are speaking into a vacuum (Murphy & Coleman, 2004). In effect, the response signals listening, which is a sign of respect, regard, and an incentive to continue to contribute to the discussion and in turn to the community.

Part of responsiveness is the practice of addressing others by name when responding. This direct social acknowledgement communicates social presence by personalising the interaction, signalling active listening. The importance of personal acknowledgement as part of the relational character of communication is reinforced by Dennen and Wieland (2007) and Lehman and Conceicao (2010) among others. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that personalisation doesn't lead to excluding others by not using names in a specific exchanges. Exclusion can be avoided by acknowledging more than one class member in a single message, weaving and synthesising ideas, and concluding a message with a message inviting the wider group to respond.

These findings challenge the work of some studies defending students' rights to read discussions without contributing actively (e.g. Gulati, 2008; Seddon, Postlethwaite, & Lee, 2010). On the other hand, other literature reinforces the kinds of mutual obligations that hold community together due to generalised reciprocity. This is where students respond to others in the expectation that someone in the group will respond in turn (e.g., Hew, Cheung, & Ng, 2010). Beyond this, Brookfield and Preskill (2005) suggest that students and teachers share responsibility for the group's learning, so that students are more likely to regard their contributions as important to the group as a whole. Sharing the teaching is worthy of cultivating, particularly in teacher education, where student teachers can practise teaching, leading and moving toward their role as teachers. This can occur via active participation in AOD, and involvement in negotiating guidelines and generating a legacy for a future class.

Student evaluations from the Semester A class indicated that the students found the initial guidelines helpful and easy to understand and follow. The emphases on word length of postings, and use of correct spelling and grammar were affirmed. With regard to the negotiation process, one student commented: "It helped us to feel that we had a voice an opinion and that our thoughts mattered" (A, anonymous feedback tool).

In a similar vein, the course appraisals for the Semester A class indicated that students regarded the guidelines as "helpful", "fair", "reasonable", "easy to follow", "informative and valuable as a check list". Each of these descriptors was used within student appraisal comments.

The guidelines were regarded as useful, flexible and fair by the students who completed the appraisal (58% completion rate).

The discussion guidelines were extremely useful as a way to not only assess my own learning, but to make sure I was meeting the requirements in discussion.

Excellent guidelines. Love how we had the ability to adjust and re-evaluate them ourselves.



The discussion guidelines are fair and they take into consideration students role in communication with others.

I like that [we had] the opportunity to make changes to the discussion guidelines, although I thought they were fine to begin with, some minor changes were highlighted that I personally found enhanced the discussions.

Incorporating student suggestions: Generating a legacy

In response to the suggestions made by students in Semester A, revisions to the discussion guidelines included reminders to:

- check punctuation, grammar and spelling is accurate and appropriate to our classroom
- respond to others in the discussion, building on ideas. Aim to ensure that others are acknowledged directly
- connect with the topic and thread of the discussion. Either follow and extend the thread, or introduce a new direction. In either case, alter the title/subject of your contribution accordingly.

These amendments represent the legacy of the Semester A class, to be passed forward to the subsequent class in Semester B.

Semester B: Respect

In the following semester, the next class started with Semester A's legacy presented as initial discussion guidelines. This time around, students again affirmed the initial discussion guidelines, emphasising particular aspects that particularly resonated with them, and suggesting adjustments. Key issues raised by students here included the need for respect and openness, where dissonance is invited and professionalism is valued. For example, the first student entering the forum commented:

Looking at the discussion guidelines it appears that nearly all eventualities relating to online dialogue have been pretty well covered. One thing that comes to mind (which is covered in the guidelines) is about taking things personally, which can happen so easily when you are not face to face with a protagonist. With this in mind I think that possibly there should be reiteration about safety in the online environment, especially relating to respecting others points of views even when not necessarily agreeing with them. Justification of your response in this situation becomes crucial to backing up your stance—but justification that is backed by professional discourse. Has anyone got any other thoughts that they might like to add or modify this idea?

This opening comment was met with agreement from peers and a consensus that part of tact and diplomacy is not only what is said but also how it is said, leading to further discussion of the use of



emoticons and signals to the group when one is playing devil's advocate. For example, students commented:

I think it all depends on a student's maturity when you are presented with points of view that are different than your own. The guidelines say, 'It is easy to misinterpret tone and intention online. Use emoticons purposefully in order to soften and convey a constructive mood.' I think this might be a solution for a lot of misunderstandings and hurt feelings. We are only human after all.

It is good personal practice to be 'prepared to shift' otherwise you are not learning alongside your fellow students and not growing personally as a student and educator.

We should be allowed to challenge and critique but I don't think that it should be done in a way that causes another person to feel that their opinion is any less. Everyone is entitled to an opinion. By having a differing one you do not have to belittle the person whose views you disagree with. As above, we need to maintain respectful communication.

I've had people disagree with me who are merely stating their own opinions. This does not offend me. However, when people go out of their way to make it personal, it makes for a very uncomfortable and unhappy learning environment for everyone.

I love reading our discussions as they show so many varied opinions and thoughts, and often give me a better insight into a particular topic or concept. I think that we are all capable of acknowledging someone's opinion, just as we would if we were face to face, and as someone has said previously, we do not need to belittle them if our opinion differs. We need to remember that this online discussion is just like face-to-face, so remembering people have feelings is always a good idea! I find that it is awesome when heaps of different opinions shine through, as it allows me to question my opinion and see it from other people's point of view.

At a later stage, students re-examined the theme of responsiveness in discussion, this time raising issues around equity and inclusion. One student initiated a thread entitled "moving out of social clicks [sic]", with the following contribution:

I have noticed that sometimes people only respond to those they know through sub-groups they have formed through various social connections. I would like to propose that students make attempts to respond more often to different people outside of their social clicks and become more inclusive of everyone in their groups, especially those who are not universally connected with a particular



degree. This would make others feel like their thoughts have been considered and valued and would perhaps boost participation in the discussions and make them more robust.

This opening comment sparked further consideration among peers, who communicated concern for respectful, responsive discussion that is open and inclusive:

I agree with this. Even as someone who is completing their degree alongside many of the others in the group I also have felt (and seen) exclusiveness in the discussions. I'm not sure how this could be avoided however as you can't make someone comment on another's post without valid reason.

Everyone should feel that their contributions have been valued! Perhaps people could try to respond to two different people in every discussion for their two postings per week? This would probably affect the flow of the discussions though.

I agree with this too, I have experienced this as well. It saddens me that people choose to ignore some people's discussions even if the person mentioned his/her name. I think it boils down to etiquette.

The two guidelines that are most relevant to this would be: - Do not post without firstly reading what others have said. This is often perceived as ignorant and disrespectful - Respond to others in the discussion, building on ideas. Aim to ensure that others are acknowledged directly possibly, the second one is the most important and could be altered somehow to state that 'you should attempt to respond to a different person in each contribution, acknowledging their thoughts and opinions'.

Again, the class in Semester B evaluated the initial discussion guidelines as “very helpful”, and valued the opportunity to modify these along the way.

Incorporating student suggestions: Generating a legacy

In response to the suggestions made by students in Semester A, revisions to the discussion guidelines included reminders to:

- Be professional. Communicate respectfully. Demonstrate your understanding of cybersafety, netiquette and the underpinning rationale for our discussion. Respect alternative viewpoints, keep an open mind, and be prepared for challenge and change.
- Attempt to respond to different people throughout the discussion so as to be inclusive.



In turn, these amendments became part of the guidelines for the subsequent class in the following year.

In summary, key themes emerging from the students' negotiation of discussion guidelines are the desire for discussion postings to be accurate and succinct, and for AOD to be responsive, inclusive and fundamentally respectful. While at first glance the Semester A concerns about accuracy and length of postings may appear to be focused on surface features of the written communication, there are deeper meanings to explore. Communicating accurately means presenting one's thinking in a careful and professional manner. Keeping posts short entails a thoughtful approach to content, with due consideration of one's audience. Rather than posting a monologue, shorter posts invite a response from others, by leaving space for further comment. As such, the themes coalesce around the notion of respectful and responsive communication. These insights constitute the legacy of learning in this study.

Conclusion

This small study's (n=68) findings suggest that students can contribute to their own learning, that of their peers, and those who follow later through negotiating protocols for online discussion. Technology enables ongoing participation while also allowing students to abstain or withdraw by choice and with a degree of anonymity. Benefits to students include the privilege of choice, empowerment and insight into pedagogical processes. For staff, the process of negotiation enables both continuity and fresh input since one semester informs the next but every class takes a different approach.

Challenges revolve around student engagement since not all students choose to participate. A further issue is how central or peripheral the negotiation of a community resource is to the class and coursework at hand. In this study, as a research activity, the negotiations were separated from assessment and course-related requirements. Arguably, however, in order to encourage and give credit for participation in negotiation, a closer connection with coursework was needed.

In terms of digital smarts, it is sensible to promote effective use of AOD as an accessible means of engaging students in dialogue and deep learning. It is smart to negotiate expectations with respect to language and ways of relating in order to determine the space of difference or how participants in AOD may be talking past each other. Where expectations are unclear, the space between participants is arguably akin to a *void*, characterised by persistent misunderstanding. However, where the expectations are disclosed, negotiated and shared, the space might be converted to a *zone* (for proximal development; Vygotsky, 1978), a pedagogical space, promoting growth in understanding (Ellsworth, 1997). For teacher education students, insight into pedagogical reasoning constitutes key learning, and the opportunity to contribute to others' learning is an authentic challenge.

I acknowledge the small-scale, situated nature of this study involving two classes in a single year within one teacher education programme in one university. Recommendations made by these participants, and how they view discussion, are not directly generalisable to other cohorts or populations. All of the knowledge is partial, provisional and open to revision in new contexts. Nevertheless, the suggestions made here raise questions for others, in terms of the extent to which these findings might have wider application. This is open for testing, and these findings might be



regarded as a ‘letter from online successors’ (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005), or as footprints picking out a pathway for others to find as they make their own way through AOD (Salmon, 2002). Future research can replicate this approach with diverse groups of students and teachers to negotiate the function and form of AOD with these groups.

In conclusion, this chapter affirms the value of AOD as a tutorial opportunity and a chance for students to build knowledge and understandings collaboratively. AOD is one area of online learning where it is smart to generate protocols for working together. This process involves drawing upon past experience, negotiating and trialling guidelines, then engaging in evaluation and reflection in order to regenerate new iterations. When articulated for others, the guidelines become legacies *of* learning: a summation of lessons from experience. As the guidelines are shared and used to inform new learning for peers, they become legacies *for* learning: generative of new possibilities.

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Appendices

1. **Initial Discussion Guidelines, Semester A**
2. **Legacy: Revised Discussion Guidelines**

1. Initial Discussion Guidelines, Semester A

Why we have discussion:

In effect, online discussion is parallel to lectures and tutorial sessions on campus. There are three levels of justification for the requirement that you engage in discussion as part of this class.

1. At the individual level, students should engage in discussion in order to learn from and with their peers and lecturers. Ideally, discussion should involve testing out ideas, sharing and building on other peoples' thinking, and gaining feedback and challenge from others' responses to our own thinking. There is very rarely ONE answer to any worthwhile question. Instead, this is about thinking of a higher order, where multiple answers and perspectives are possible.

2. At the community level, firstly students have a responsibility to each other to join a learning community and to learn together, supporting others' learning as well as their own. This is part of teacher education and is very good preparation for becoming a teacher. Students should contribute to online discussion so that they don't let their group members down, and so that comments aren't ignored; and so that help is found when needed.

3. At the wider community level, future teachers must be prepared for teaching in the classroom/school, and for meeting the needs of the children you will work with. Discussion is one element in this preparation, and participation in discussion with colleagues (whether face-to-face or online) should expose future teachers to a range of thinking, perspectives, theory and issues. If students do not engage with this thinking, they may be less prepared for teaching, and less prepared for the professional discussions that will be ongoing throughout your careers.

What you are expected to do in discussion:

- contribute to every discussion, at least twice
- keep each contribution to around 150 words max, as a guide
- write in clear paragraphs, for ease of reading
- connect with the discussion theme, and respond to others in the discussion, building on ideas
- share personal experience and perspectives of relevance to the discussion
- use the discussion to clarify understanding, and to engage critically and deeply with the theme, theory and issues
- aim to keep the discussion moving forward

In relation to readings, these should be completed regularly in order to construct familiarity with theory and diverse perspectives. When you refer to readings, you should avoid lengthy direct quotes in discussion. Instead, discuss readings by paraphrasing the key ideas and applying your own thinking to these. When directly using readings in discussion, it is not necessary to use full APA referencing if the reading is known to the class (e.g. it is from the book of readings). In this case it is



fine to use the author's name only. However, if using an original source, that others may be unacquainted with, a full reference should be provided to enable others to track down and follow up the reading if they want to.

What you should avoid doing:

- Please do not avoid discussion, or post once and then disappear. These approaches breach the intent of discussion, indicate lack of regard for our class community and fall short of minimum attendance and participation requirements for this paper
- Similarly, do not double-post (2 consecutive posts, or posts very close together). While this may be necessary when 'life gets in the way', it is not ideal and if everyone did this, there would be no discussion occurring throughout the week, limiting the chances for reflection and response within our community
- Do not post lengthy contributions. Research suggests that your fellow students will not read your posts if they are too long
- Do not post without firstly reading what others have said. This is often perceived as ignorant and disrespectful
- Do not fixate on the personal. Although valued, it is a starting point. Your experiences are one set of possible experiences, and the goal is to begin with these as a starting point while looking more widely beyond the past or here and now
- Do not play it safe, agreeing with all and sundry. This is dull, unimaginative, and does not assist in moving the discussion along. If you agree, say why and justify why your agreement matters
- Please do not take things personally. Don't be quick to take offence, but rather give others the benefit of the doubt. Remember that:
 - others may be playing "devil's advocate" and proposing an extreme view in order to prompt thinking, and raise alternative perspectives;
 - it is easy to misinterpret tone and intention online. Use emoticons purposefully in order to soften and convey a constructive mood J

What to expect from your lecturers in our online discussions:

Lecturers aim to join in each discussion, meeting similar expectations to the students. In short, we aim to:

- Be there
- Be brief
- Respond
- Share our own stories
- Promote deep and critical thinking (at times, we will play 'Devil's Advocate' in order to probe differing viewpoints)
- Keep the fires burning

Feedback on discussion will be given within the discussion, formatively, so look out for lecturer comments on how the discussion is progressing.



2. Legacy: Revised Discussion Guidelines

Why we have discussion:

In effect, online discussion is parallel to lectures and tutorial sessions on campus.

There are three levels of justification for the requirement that you engage in discussion as part of this class.

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What you are expected to do in discussion:

- Contribute to every discussion, at least twice
- Keep each contribution to around 150 words max, as a guide
- Write in clear paragraphs, for ease of reading
- Check punctuation, grammar and spelling is accurate and appropriate to our classroom
- Respond to others in the discussion, building on ideas. Aim to ensure that others are acknowledged directly. Attempt to respond to different people throughout the discussion so as to be inclusive
- Connect with the topic and thread of the discussion. Either follow and extend the thread, or introduce a new direction. In either case, alter the title/subject of your contribution accordingly
- Share personal experience and perspectives of relevance to the discussion
- Use the discussion to clarify understanding, and to engage critically and deeply with the theme, theory and issues



- Be professional. Communicate respectfully. Demonstrate your understanding of cybersafety, netiquette and the underpinning rationale for our discussion. Respect alternative viewpoints, keep an open mind, and be prepared for challenge and change
- Aim to keep the discussion moving forward

In relation to readings, these should be completed regularly in order to construct familiarity with theory and diverse perspectives. When you refer to readings, you should avoid lengthy direct quotes in discussion. Instead, discuss readings by paraphrasing the key ideas and applying your own thinking to these. When directly using readings in discussion, it is not necessary to use full APA referencing if the reading is known to the class (e.g. it is from the book of readings). In this case it is fine to use the author's name only. However, if using an original source, that others may be unacquainted with, a full reference should be provided to enable others to track down and follow up the reading if they want to.

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- Do not post lengthy contributions. Research suggests that your fellow students will not read your posts if they are too long
- Do not post without firstly reading what others have said. This is often perceived as ignorant and disrespectful
- Similarly, do not exclude others by responding to the same individuals every time you post
- Do not fixate on the personal. Although valued, it is a starting point. Your experiences are one set of possible experiences, and the goal is to begin with these as a starting point while looking more widely beyond the past or here and now
- Do not play it safe, agreeing with all and sundry. This is dull, unimaginative, and does not assist in moving the discussion along. If you agree, say why and justify why your agreement matters
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 - a.) others may be playing "devil's advocate" and proposing an extreme view in order to prompt thinking, and raise alternative perspectives;
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